

René Houtrides

Thunderstorm

Entre chien et loup—between dog and wolf—say the French, meaning *dusk*. *Gloaming*, say the Scots, of that atmospheric juncture of day to night, ruled by the Greek god Astraeus, husband of Dawn. *Oscuridad*, say the Spanish, of this first hint of obscurity. 夕 (xi) is the Chinese pictograph, reminding us of crescent moon. Twilight's border, like the tick of zero velocity when a ball tossed upward hesitates, fleetingly, before returning to gravity's downward grasp. Poetic caesura.

Into this temporal phase, this pastel tint, I exit a Manhattan subway, on my way to meet my sister for dinner at a restaurant. She, too, is *entre chien et loup*—receiving, maybe this very moment, a post-test prognosis from her doctor. The mettle that's gotten her through seven years of fight has made her insist that she make that medical visit solo, that she and I not change our sunset plans.

Sweat sticks to me like unwanted memory. My clothing gluey. An unusually hot October day is at an end. *Hace calor, il fait chaud*, IT does hot, say the Spanish and French, respectively. IT? What IT? With the rolling in of evening, the high warmth convects off the sidewalk, rises, and bumps its rump against the tall buildings. Sultry humidity balloons like a corpse abandoned in a hallway. In a slow race (a dead heat), vapor ascends. Climbs. My surroundings unsettled. My own uneasiness.

After a day of sunshine, a happy girlhood, a sweep of weighty shadow occupies most of an oatmeal-colored sky and challenges urban architecture—glass, steel, and stone. Fat clouds, their gloomy grieving plume of undersurface a pathetic fallacy for my sister's struggle. Aloft, far away from me, air amasses, feeds, develops, levers itself. Moist clouds push at one another and then collide. *Έχει συννεφια* (echei synnefia)—IT has clouds, say the Greeks. Cloud, 云 (yun), says the Chinese pictogram, each stroke snatching for something tangible. *Nuage*, say the French, in spongy resonance with fluff.

In my nostrils, the odor of imminent rain—*petrichor* (to describe the ozone-rich scent), combining *πετρα* (petra—*stone*) and *ιχθωρ* (*ichor* . . . the blood of pagan Hellenic gods). The universe is sending an as-yet-unfinished aromatic message. This intimation will be fulfilled, just as all the other clues dispatched to me, day after day after day after day after day, wherever I turn my brains. And still I do not recognize the mortal puzzle.

That's all, until penetration of lightning—*αστραπη* (astrapi)—

bolt hurled in anger by Zeus, king of the Olympian gods. The passionate flare gigajoule grabs my skull and shakes it brusquely. Seven years ago, my sister gave me her bad-health news, and I immediately thought, illness and death are like everything else; some people get it easy; some people get it hard. My sister is getting illness hard. She will suffer.

Directly above, another run of lightning. *Coup de foudre*. *Relampago*. 闪电 (shandian), the Chinese characters unite, logically, *avoidance* and *shock*. After all, lightning is heart-stopping blister four times fierier than the sun. I briefly halt in response to the stutter-step that has been written, calligraphic, in the ether, then hurry on.

After that, a beginning dribble that morphs to nonchalant shower. *Giboulée*, say the French. *Plowdery*, say the Scots. *Lluvia*, say the Spanish, and recycle the sound as a name for a lovely girl. Perhaps one with supple arms like my sister's. Or *lluvia de estrellas*, for meteor showers—ephemeral streaks glimpsed in the night. 淋浴 (linyu), the ideographs show me the raindrops falling, and I open my umbrella to the pitter that pats its dome. The rhythm of my steps gently splattering. Music of tender percussion all around me.

I hear a cough of thunder—Zeus redux—overwhelm the placid tune that taps my umbrella. Here, the memory revisits of my sister's first diagnosis. Of my looking at her lowered head. Waves of loud vast rumbling cascade, following a spark of charged light. *Βροντη* (vronti), *thunder*. From which Patrick (born with the anemic last name Prunty), father of Anne, Emily, and Charlotte, drew *Brönte*, a new booming surname for his troubled family. *Tonnerre*. *Trueno*. 雷 (lei), implying *explosion*. My stomach, with my mood in tow, collects the reverberation, transitorily loses mooring, regains its abdominal residence.

Next, speared again by wriggling electricity, the clouds spew a sudden squall. Sharp fist of water at an incline hits me. Guttering. Wonderfully. Guttering. Squall. *Gandiegow*, say the Highland Scots. 风 (feng). *Chubasco*. *Pluie torrentielle*. Resolute leaping opus. Rubbish, in water form, drags fallen autumn leaves into the sewer. Yellow and orange, like bad calendar art. Laughter gulfs out of me. I love my planet, our impermanent passage through it.

A sudden belch of darkness, and I stand in a convulsive fountain driven by a fast-flowing gusting tilt-a-whirl wind. *Δυνατός ανέμος* (dynatos anemos), the vocabulary carrying the etymology of *dynamic* (*power*) in its wake. 颶風 (biao feng), chasing the wind. *Hay viento*, there is wind, say the Spanish. The *hay viento* inverts my umbrella. *Vent fort*, say the French. The *vent fort* breaks my umbrella's ribs, and I am left holding my dead *brolly*, *rainshade*, *gamp*, *bumbershoot*, say the English. *Parapluie*. *Paraguas*. 雨傘

Kestrel

(yusan), displays the object's roofed shape. *Ομβρελλα*, the Greek borrow forward (like the English) from the Latin *umbra*. I toss my broolly's flimsy metal skeleton and nylon skin into a trash basket on the pavement, leaving myself as unencumbered as I am unprotected. A rehearsal for a carcass.

Meanwhile, upstairs in the cosmos attic, the rain gods throw a chivaree. They dance the fandango, the jig, the *μαλεβιζιотиς* (maleviziotis). Foot stomping in drunken cahoots. Their divine shoes break through the ceiling. The world is ablaze with a three-dimensional curtain of water. Downpour. *Plype*, say the Highland Scots. *Pish-oot*, say the Highland Scots. *Thunder-plump*, say the Highland Scots. I am no longer walking in rain; I am enveloped in a deluge. *Déluge* (as in King Louis XVI's accurate prediction of pending catastrophe *après moi*). *Κατακλυσμος* (kataklizmos), from "I will wash you off"—kin to all the primal stories that birth the word *cataclysm*. All the flood myths that stream through the globe's cultures, submerge geographies, and record destruction, from pre-history and Bible and epic and image and song. 洪水 (hongshui), conveying something of *dazed* and *overwhelmed*. Somewhere else, by herself, my beleaguered sister is tumbling in the ecosphere's washing machine, heading toward sudsy. Rinse and spin.

Five minutes later, a transient snippet of calm. Lull (companion to *lullaby*). *Accalmie*. *Calma*. *Παυση* (pafsi), tracing backwards from *pause*. And then (after the short-lived letup) the resurgence of squirt and glare. A new choke of thunder—Zeus insists that he's not done with his tantrum. Raining Cats and Dogs. Umbrella-less, bumbershoot-less, I cluster myself, miserably wet—*drookit*, say the Highland Scots—into an entryway. What am I doing knotted here? I am acknowledging scale, recognizing alone-ness, conceding blip-ness on the screen of *IT*, the goggle-eye of the sky, the overhead abyss of IT-NESS. *Il fait pluie*—IT makes rain. That IT, the IT that makes weather. That IT nothingness, IT shatters. IT bellows savage rebellion. Mutiny of the heavens roar. Lucifer in battle armor, pitchfork stabbing. The Book of Revelation. Drumbeat insurrection of dread.

What does it mean, my taking cover here, in this ordinary doorway, on this commonplace Thursday, with words raining on me? What is the plot of this lurching precipitation script (from which I have failed to memorize my lines)? Desperation manifest would look like this elemental outbreak, a stand-in for the drench of human fear happening everywhere, filling in the many blanks on every continent. Originating where? Check under the hood. The IT? The us? The continuous play's cast and scenery constantly in flux. This thunderstorm in which I huddle is only one of the thousands bouncing liquid weight, this very same instant, on the Earth's orb. Weather's imitation of forlorn hope. Hope against hope. Hope wrestling itself.

Hideous. Horrible. A personal Thermopylae. A private Battle of Culloden. An individual Tiananmen Square. A suicide mission. People with no doorway to hole up in. Humans without so much as a fragile broolly for a shield. *Enfants perdus*—lost children, say the French.

Thus, my contemplation in the doorway, until the cathartic (*χαθαρτικός*—another cousin to *cleansing*) rainstorm dissipates, decreases impulsive discharges. Stops. What does the standstill feel like? Like emptiness. Like softness. Like cotton. Like the brink of unexpected joy. Like homesickness. *Mal du pays* (ache of the country), say the French. *Añoranza* (yearning), say the Spanish. 乡思 (xiangchou), despondent because of being away from home too long, explain the Chinese. *Νοσταλγία*—thus we inherit *nostalgia* from the Greeks, whose Homer sang *The Odyssey*, the lengthy hankering journey back to flesh and blood. Home sweet home.

I, too, a wanderer, now poke my head out from my turtle-shell of doorway and continue sister-ward. On my way. Way. 道 (Tao, noun and verb for *way*), say the Chinese, when they mean *path*, simply path. Simple as dirt. But striving, simultaneously, to articulate a guiding numinous philosophy more subtle than can be expressed. The Tao, certainly Tao, not necessarily Tao—suspected, but elusive.

The concrete path ahead of me is damp from weeping. I reach the restaurant where, still sopping—*trempeé comme une soupe*, soaked like a soup, say the French—I sit, waiting, on a chair. My eyes are dry, but the rest of my body appears to be crying. The water dripping off of me deposits puddles—*dubs*, say the Highland Scots—*λακκούβες* (lakkouves), *flaques*, *charcos*, 水坑 (shui keng)—on the carpeted floor.

From the restaurant window I see a bit of rainbow—*watergow*, say the Scots. *Arc-en-ciel*, arch in the sky, say the French. *Ουρανό τοξο* (ouranio toxo)—heavenly crossbow, the second word used, as well, to denote the weapon with which Odysseus, finally returning to his own domain, slays his wife's presumptuous suitors while they dare feast on his food. Or, the Greeks, being fond of Iris—their winged-goddess embodiment of that spectrum in the sky—say *ιριδα* (iritha). The Spanish join in with *arco iris*. 彩虹 (caihong), say the Chinese, who believe the curve of bending colors represents the union of Yin and Yang.

My sister is here, at the restaurant door. She waves her graceful arms. Her face beaming. She's on cloud nine. A burden leaves me, or I pass to the opposite shore. Rich tranquility, unsummoned, finds me. The firmament sighs. The sidewalks shimmer, 微光 (wei guang). *Λαμπυρίζουν* (lampyrizoun, as in lamp or as in *Λαμππή* [Lambri], the miracle of Easter Sunday, the triumph over death). Yes, the sidewalks, *ils miroitent*. *Ellas brillan*. Reverent, radiant, the bathed city glistens.

